INTRODUCTION

A. THE BACKDROP

Gender inequality\(^1\) is, arguably, one of the crucial development problems, which adversely affects the well-being of women and human development (Sen 2001a). Also, gender inequality seems to lower economic growth and efficiency (World Bank 2000). No country is immune to, or free from, the relative disadvantage of women vis-à-vis men. Gender inequality is embedded in almost every sphere of the society and economy. The extent and manifestation of such inequalities, however, vary enormously across countries and also among groups and regions within countries. In many countries, especially in the South Asia, female deprivation is evident even in such basic aspects as survival, health and nutrition, and primary education.

In India, as also in some of the other South Asian countries, the deprivation permeates even to aspects of private, family life. Studies from India suggest that despite regional variation, women tend to have a markedly lower autonomy in the household. They seem to have much less freedom to decide on, and use the available facilities for, their health and reproductive matters. They tend to have limited access to sources of independent income and much less control over household economic resources. They are often entitled to a lesser share of household resources including the life-sustaining resources such as healthcare and food. They seem to encounter a number of constraints, which include — but

\(^1\) Studies define gender equality as the 'absence of discrimination, on the basis of a person's sex, in opportunities and in the allocation of resources or benefits or in access to services' (WHO 1998, p. 57) World Bank's (2000, p. 35) definition on gender equality seems to be, however, more broad and inclusive, and refers to 'equality under law, equality of opportunity - including equality in access to human capital and other productive resources and equality of rewards for work - and equality of voice.' Viewed in this sense, gender inequality can be considered as the presence of discrimination or lack of equality in these aspects.
are by no means limited to — less priority, requirement of approval or sanction to physical violence, in aspects of their everyday life. The outcome of these is indeed poignant and regressive in nature.

A growing number of empirical studies from India reveal female deprivation in a number of aspects relating to survival, health and nutrition, and other such aspects. National Family Health Survey of India (1998-99), for instance, reports that the mortality rate of girls (37 per 1000 live births in 1-4 age group) is 48 per cent higher than that of boys at 25 per 1000. The Survey also shows greater incidence of malnutrition among girls than among boys (!IPS and ORC Macro 2000). Micro studies suggest that boys are preferred over girls in the provision of healthcare (Kynch and Sen 1983; Basu 1989). The female-male ratio of 933 women per 1000 men in 2001 not only reveals the shortfall of 67 women, but also points to a large number of missing women — women who had died as a result of unequal treatment in the allocation of resources, mainly healthcare and food.2 The female literacy rate of 54 per cent in 2001 is 22 percentage points below the male literacy rate of 76 per cent. Studies also note the prevalence of domestic violence in all parts of India (CWDS 2002).

The factors that lead to and sustain the lower well-being of women vis-à-vis men and the processes underlying it have been the subject of enquiry by a vast body of studies. It appears that the lower well-being of women is a cumulative outcome of a complex web of factors with a diverse origin: historical, cultural, ecological, sociological and economic (Bardhan 1974, p. 1303; World Bank 2000, pp. 13-4). This complexity creates strong disagreements on what constitutes the appropriate and effective approach to address gender inequality. Nevertheless, there is a growing agreement in the development literature, especially in the

---

2 The estimates show that the number of missing women in India varies from 24.6 to 42.6 million depending on the differences in methodologies and the assumptions underlying them (Klasen and Wink 2003, p. 279). Bhat’s (2002) estimates based on female-male ratios also show that around 21.7 million women were found to be missing in India between 1911 and 1991 (p. 5109).
context of South Asia, that women's participation in paid work may both enhance women's well-being and attenuate the intensity of gender inequalities.

For instance, while discussing the usefulness of the bargaining framework in the Indian context, Sen argues that paid work can enhance women's well-being through 'a better breakdown position,' possibly a clearer perception on her individuality and well-being, and a higher perceived contribution to the family's economic position' (Sen 1990a, p. 144). Further, based on the evidence from a number of developing countries, Naila Kabeer (2003, p. 181) argues that 'access to paid work can increase women's agency in critical ways.' It may be worthwhile to mention here, in addition to the above, that a number of empirical studies reveal, fairly consistently, that female employment tends to increase the survival chances of girls in India (Rosenzweig and Schultz 1982; Tulasidhar 1993; Murthi, Guio and Dreze 1995).

The present study attempts to examine empirically the validity of these arguments in India: whether women's participation in paid work enhances their well-being. However, the diverse cultural and socio-economic milieu of India — pronounced variation in cultural norms, economic growth, human development and gender disparities in well-being not only across regions but also between states within regions — calls for an examination in multiple settings. The study, therefore, intends to examine the claim in four Indian states with varying socio-economic settings. Such an attempt would help assess the wider influence of women's work on their well-being.

B. THE CLAIM

How does women's participation in paid work enhance their well-being? Studies identify a number of ways through which paid work can enhance women's well-

---

3 Breakdown position refers to a person's vulnerability or strength in the bargaining framework in the intrahousehold resource allocation. A more favourable placing in the breakdown position would tend to help in securing a more favourable bargaining outcome (Sen 1990a, p. 135).
being. However, they can be grouped broadly into two. First, participation in paid work may both make women's economic contribution to the household visible and reduce their economic dependency on others. An increased economic contribution and reduced economic dependency may enhance women's bargaining power and autonomy, thereby leading to a favourable intra-household resource allocation. Second, participation in work away from home may increase women's mobility and hence exposure to, and interaction with, the outside world. These would weaken their attachment to social norms and improve their receptivity to use modern healthcare facilities and birth control measures. The independent earning would give them resources and confidence to use these as means for better well-being (Dreze and Sen 1995, 2002; Sen 1999).

Women's participation in paid work appears to have wider potentials besides enhancing their well-being. This is especially so in many of the South Asian countries including India, where social norms constrain women's access to economic resources and their participation in social spheres. Besides providing access to an independent income, women's participation in paid work may also serve as a source of their self-worth and dignity (Chen 1995, p. 54; Kabeer 2000, p. 189), and become a major influence for social change in general (Sen 1999, p. 201). Further, it has been argued that women's participation in the labour market can lead to output gains and poverty reduction besides enhancing women's well-being (Tzannatos 1999, p. 552). The proposition that women's paid work enhances their well-being, thus, has some backing — both explicit and implicit — from distinct approaches which otherwise differ substantially, in terms of diagnosis and treatment of economic and social issues and hence in the range and reach of their policy prescriptions, such as Marxian, Neo-classical and Women in Development.

In 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State,' Frederick Engels (1972/1884) argues that in the old communistic households, women's task of household management was much of a public activity. With the onset of patriarchy and monogamy in the family, however, the household management
lost its public character and became a private service. The wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production. Though the emergence of large-scale modern industry opened up avenues for women’s participation in social production, it was made possible only at the expense of household management. That is, women’s participation in social production affected their household management and vice versa, thereby leading to a role conflict. Hence, in most cases, ‘the husband is obliged to earn a living and support his family, and this in itself gives him a position of supremacy without any special legal titles and privileges’ (p. 137). Therefore, Engels argues, ‘the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry’ (pp. 137-8).

The Women in Development approach (Boserup 1970; Rogers 1980) also emphasises the importance of women’s greater integration in the development process including their entry into the labour market, but from a different perspective. Boserup (1970) argues that the introduction of modern technology and cash crops, and subsequent acquisition of knowledge and training benefited largely men rather than women. Men’s increased access to new technologies and education widened productivity gaps between men and women. The increasing productivity gap forced women either to withdraw from the labour force or confine themselves to less productive sectors, thereby resulting in the loss of women’s status (pp. 54-60). Boserup, therefore, calls for a greater participation of women in the mainstream development process, including the labour force, so as to share the fruits of development.  

---

4 It has been contended that Marxian theory tends to ignore the important mechanisms through which women continue to be subordinated even when they are involved in productive work. Molyneux (1984) and Croll (1986) discuss these issues in detail. For a discussion against Engels’ proposition of abolition of private property, see Agarwal (1994).

5 Beneria and Sen (1981), Sen and Grown (1987), Kabeer (1995), among others, advance a succinct criticism against this approach. Not only do they disagree with the notion (of Boserup) that the development process is beneficial to women, but also underline the need for some structural changes to actualise the benefits of women’s employment and their participation in the development process fully. Nevertheless, they do acknowledge that ‘productive labour outside the home is the perceived mechanism for the emancipation of women’ (Beneria and Sen 1982, p. 171).
Neo-classical economic literature also provides some support to the proposition that women’s employment may enhance their well-being. Invoking the logic of Becker’s (1981) Unitary household models, Rosenzweig and Schultz (1982) argue — based on their empirical evidence from India — that gender difference in child survival depends on the expected relative labour market returns. Hence, parents tend to allocate resources selectively to children who are expected to be economically more active and reward the family in future. This implies that in households where women are likely to play an economically more active role, there is an incentive to invest in the well-being of women. Women’s economic contribution to the household would, therefore, increase their well-being.\(^6\)

Bardhan’s (1974) pioneering attempt to trace the reasons for the gender gap in child survival in India provides a basis for this reasoning. Finding a coexistence of higher female labour force participation and lesser mortality of girls in rice producing regions of India, he postulates that economic value of women would be higher in areas that involve greater participation of female labour. Hence, female children in these regions would be regarded as less of a liability (Bardhan 1974, p. 1304).\(^7\)

However, Folbre (1984) propounds an alternative explanation for the findings of Rosenzweig and Schultz (1982). She argues that women’s participation in the labour market may augment their bargaining power, which would enable them to allocate more resources towards girls relative to that of boys (Folbre 1984, p. 519). Folbre’s argument converges with the predictions of a set of economic models concerning intrahousehold resource allocation, referred to commonly as

---

\(^6\) This approach has been the target of consistent criticism, as it seems to consider gender disparities in child survival as an economically rational investment decision by the family (Hart 1995, p. 44; Kabeer 1995, p. 69; Sen 1995a, p. 250). See also Folbre (1988) and Agarwal (1997) for a critical scrutiny of the issues involved.

\(^7\) Miller (1981) and Dyson and Moore (1983) also underline the importance of non-economic factors. Miller argues that there is nothing intrinsic to the operation of rice cultivation, which specifically requires female labour. Instead, culture defines gender roles (Miller 1981, p. 113). Lower female work participation in states like Kerala and West Bengal, which are essentially rice producing regions, provide some support to Miller’s argument. Kumar (1989) provides a synthesis of the competing arguments.
Cooperative Bargaining models. The cooperative bargaining models assume that members bargain over household resources and those with higher bargaining power would receive favourable allocations. The bargaining power of the members would depend on their threat-points or fallback positions (Manser and Brown 1980; McElroy and Horney 1981).

The threat point of a wife depends on the prices of her goods, *wage rates for her labour*, her non-wage income, and her extra-environmental parameters, which include parameters that characterise marriage markets, the legal structures within which marriage and divorce occur, the gender distribution of government taxes and government or private transfers, and so forth (McElroy 1990, p. 567, emphasis added). These models imply, therefore, that resource allocation within the household would favour a member who has greater opportunities outside the household. Extending the bargaining framework, Sen brings in additional qualitative dimensions — to which these quantitative models are not sensitive enough — with women’s participation in paid work, such as women’s enhanced perception on their well-being and increased recognition of women’s economic contribution, which are likely to enhance women’s well-being (Sen 1990a, pp. 135-7). The models, thus, explicitly acknowledge the importance of women’s participation in paid work for their well-being.

C. ISSUES AND OBJECTIVES

It has been fairly agreed that in many developing countries, a significant proportion of women enter into the labour market mainly out of poverty (Baden and Milward 1995; Sethuraman 1998; Balakrishnan 2002). Most of these poor women, who belong predominantly to disadvantaged social groups especially in the Indian context, are likely to be illiterate or possess little educational qualifications. While their little technical and managerial skills limit their scope

---

8 Nevertheless, Lundberg and Pollak (1993), Katz (1997), Konrad and Lommerud (2000) and Chen and Woolley (2001) attempt to bring in some of these qualitative dimensions within the quantitative framework. For a non-technical discussion of these aspects, see Hart (1995), Lundberg and Pollak (1996), Agarwal (1997) and Folbre (1997), among others.
for better employment and potential for upward labour mobility, their material deprivation dictates them to take up at once whatever menial or precarious forms of employment are available. Therefore, most of these poor women are absorbed predominantly in agriculture, other casual or informal, and assembly-line jobs. These jobs not only remain on the bottom rungs of the labour hierarchy, but also are irregular in nature, as they are influenced by the vagaries of season. More importantly, these jobs do not normally embody the central elements of decent work such as adequate rewards and benefits, job security, rights at work, social protection, and representation and voice (Rodgers 2002; Standing 2002).

These poor working women are further disadvantaged, as they both bear the primary responsibility for domestic maintenance activities and caring labour, and have little access to services and facilities that ease their work burden. They tend to balance the triple responsibilities of breadwinning, domestic chores, and child and elderly care mainly at the expense of their health and leisure. Under resource scarcity, women’s well-being not only becomes secondary to the survival of the household but also to the well-being of male members due to the household gender division of labour and the attendant hierarchy, and social norms underlying intrahousehold resource allocation. We would argue, therefore, that poverty induced work participation, even if it fetches an income, may not make a significant impact on women’s well-being.

Instead, the economic and social standing required to enhance women’s well-being would depend crucially on the type of work they are engaged in. The expected effects of bargaining power and mobility would depend largely on the nature of work, rather than work per se. Exposure to knowledge and use of healthcare facilities may vary, for instance, between agriculture and managerial jobs. Similarly, service related jobs might lead to a relatively greater freedom of mobility than manual jobs. Also, employment in the formal sector through a relatively regular, higher income would not only enable women to opt for
quality healthcare facilities and alternative childcare facilities, but also enhance their access to services and appliances that would lessen their domestic work burden. We would argue, therefore, that the nature of women's work would have a differential impact on their well-being.

Broadly, the study attempts to explore the validity of these arguments. By doing so, the study seeks to examine certain sets of relationships advanced in the development literature, and to ascertain whether such relationships remain intact or undergo changes when some structural factors are taken into consideration. By factoring in some of the crucial parameters, the study attempts to identify the larger economic and social processes underlying the nature and extent of association between women's work and well-being. The objectives of the study may be schematised into three strands of analytically interwoven questions, which are posed below.

1. Does participation in paid work enable women to attain a higher well-being? Alternatively, does participation in work without a corresponding income necessarily lower, or slow down the enhancement of, women's well-being?

2. Are the effects of women's work on their well-being uniform irrespective of the factors and conditions that facilitate women's work participation? Or, do the effects vary in tandem with varying motivations and factors underlying women's employment? If so, then, does poverty induced work participation necessarily enhance women's well-being?

3. Do the effects of women's work on their well-being vary in line with the kind of work they carry out? Or does nature of work exert differential influence, and therefore have differing impact, on women's well-being?

D. APPROACH

The study approaches these issues at both individual and household levels. At the individual level, the study classifies all women broadly into 'Currently Working' and 'Non-working.' Thus, work becomes the primary basis of
classification. Conceptually, work is wider than employment or job, since it includes wage employment, self-employment and home-working (Grown and Sebstad 1989, p. 939; Rodgers 2002, p. 15). While participation in work is an essential first step, 'the actual economic worth of working women would depend on their realised economic contribution to the household' (Agarwal 1986, p. 176). This is more so in rural India wherein women are also employed as unpaid labourers in family farms or enterprises. Though they are economically active and engaged in productive tasks, they hardly have an access to income. Therefore, more than women's participation in work, their ability to earn an income becomes crucial. Hence, working women are further classified into Earning and Non-earning Women, i.e., working women who earn an income and those who do not earn an income.

Further, women's work is classified into Low, Medium and High. This is intended mainly to assess the differential influence of nature of work on working women's well-being. It is done broadly along the lines of social relations of production and technical content of job. Social relations of production refer to ownership of productive resources, and the authority and the responsibility workers exercise over their own and other's labour. Technical content of work includes the nature and range of worker's skills as well as their autonomy in design and problem solving, and in regulating the speed, intensity and duration of their work (Lawson 1990; Faulkner and Lawson 1991). The classification centres on authority, skill and autonomy associated with the job. At the household level, the study classifies all the households broadly into Poor, Non-poor and Rich. Issues concerning the measurement and assumptions underlying them and their potential limitations are discussed in detail in chapters four and five. Analysis is carried out between working and non-working women using these individual and household criteria.

9 The types of work falling under each category - Low, Medium and High - are stated in Chapter five.
10 The variables included in, and weights assigned to them while constructing the index is given in Appendix Two.
The Capability Approach — propounded by Amartya Sen (1982) and expanded further by Martha Nussbaum (2000a) — sees development as the expansion of individuals' capabilities or freedom. An individual's well-being is viewed in terms of her freedom to select from the combination of doings and beings valuable to her. The approach has received much acclaim for its sensitivity to the factors, both general and specific, leading to the deprivation of women's well-being. Progressively expanding the philosophical base and reach of the capability approach, especially for gender justice, Nussbaum (2000a, pp. 78-80) has proposed, through years of cross-cultural discussion, ten central capabilities for quality of life assessment and political planning. The study attempts to examine the influence of women's paid work on three aspects of well-being, referred to here as Autonomy, Physical Health and Reproductive Outcome, whose constitutive elements are discussed in chapter three. These three aspects inherently belong to, or associate closely with, the central human capabilities suggested by Nussbaum (2003, pp. 41-2).

E. THE SETTING

On the face of it, the proposition assumes significance in India, where women's well-being as also their participation in paid work is low. However, the diverse experience of India with varying regional patterns in women's work and well-being provides an interesting setting for a detailed exploration of these issues. Based on the macro level indicators of women's work participation and well-being, all the major Indian states are classified broadly into the following four groups. First, states that have both women's high work participation and high well-being. Second, states that tend to have women's high work participation but low well-being. Third, states that tend to have women's low work participation but high well-being. Fourth, states that experience both women's low work

---

11 It is important to state here that the concept of well-being is quite broader in nature, as we will see in chapter three. However, these indicators are used mainly to classify states into some groups and to identify states among such groups for detailed analysis of the three aspects of well-being mentioned above. The indicators of well-being used for classifying the states, and states belonging to the four groups are given in Appendix 1.
participation and low well-being. One state each from the four groups is selected for analysis.

The states selected are Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh respectively. While Tamil Nadu belongs to the group of states with both high work participation and well-being of women, Kerala comes under states with low work participation but high well-being. Madhya Pradesh is one of the few states that experiences high work participation but low well-being. Uttar Pradesh falls under the group of states that have both low work participation and low well-being. Notably, Tamil Nadu and Kerala belong to the Southern part of India, whereas Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh form the core of North India.

F. Data

The economic tables of Censuses and periodic rounds of National Sample Survey furnish information on women's work participation over the years and to some extent information on sectors where women are employed. Although Socio-cultural tables of Censuses provide some information regarding women's well-being, they do not provide these indicators at a disaggregated level on the basis of women's work (i.e. between Working and Non-working women). However, National Family Health Survey (1998-99) — NFHS-2, hereafter — addresses this lacuna to some extent. The present study, therefore, uses NFHS-2 for the analysis.

NFHS-2 covered a representative sample of 90,330 ever-married women in the age group of 15-49 years. The survey was conducted during 1998-99 in 26 Indian states that constitute more than 99 percent of India's population. It employed a similar, systematic, multi-stage stratified sampling for each state. The survey also adopted uniform questionnaires and field procedures. It contains detailed household and individual level information on demography and health, as well as village characteristics (for details, see IIPS and ORC Macro 2000). The present analysis is confined mainly to individual and household level information.
While the large-scale data sources would help explore the propositions and issues and indicate the outcome and associations between variables, they may not shed enough light on the processes underlying the outcome and associations. To identify the processes, intensive fieldwork is carried out in Tamil Nadu, one of the four states of our analysis.

G. CHAPTER SCHEME

The study is organised into seven chapters including this introductory chapter. The second chapter discusses the issues, both conceptual and measurement, pertaining to women's work and contribution, and their likely implications for their well-being. Chapter three, towards attempting to lay a framework for identification and analysis of well-being, discusses the concept of well-being and competing approaches dealing with it. The capability approach appears to be the most suitable one for our analysis, and based on that three aspects of well-being are identified for detailed analysis. Chapter four attempts to explore the association between women's work, especially paid work, and the three aspects of well-being. The issues relating to the measurement of these three aspects of well-being and the assumptions underlying them are also discussed here. Chapter five extends the analysis by bringing in factors such as poverty and nature of work, and also examines the independent influence of these and other factors that would potentially influence women's well-being. Chapter six attempts to identify, and provide an indication of, the processes underlying women's work and well-being based on micro-level evidence from Tamil Nadu. Chapter seven, which is the concluding chapter, summarises the major findings and discusses their policy implications. An attempt is also made to identify the further research needs emerging from the present study.